

# TESTIMONY ON HB 5225-5230

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## **I. The Importance of Ensuring That Released Prisoners Have I.D.**

- As a former staff attorney at Legal Aid of Western Michigan specializing on prisoner reentry issues, I worked with many clients who did not have state I.D. I saw clients who had been without I.D. for over a year. I saw clients who were turned down for jobs because they did not have I.D. I saw clients who were living without heat in the winter because they could not provide I.D. to get their utilities turned on.
- Prisoners who lack I.D. at the time of release often have great difficulty getting together the documents they need in order to get I.D. Many need to order their birth certificates. Few have alternative documents like passports or military I.D. cards. Virtually every client with whom I worked had to order old school records in order to prove their identity. For some of my clients it was literally impossible to obtain the three separate pieces of documentation required to get a new I.D.
- Even with the assistance of an attorney, it often took my clients several weeks or months to get I.D.
- The absence of I.D. makes it very hard for prisoners to transition successfully back into the community. Employers require I.D. to hire employees. Landlords require I.D. to rent to tenants. Utility companies require I.D. to provide service. And some social welfare programs, such as Medicaid, require I.D. to provide benefits.
- Ensuring that parolees have I.D. is a public safety issue, both because easing the transition for parolees will reduce recidivism and because it is important for law enforcement purposes that parolees have I.D.

## II. Pilot Projects

- Both the Secretary of State and the Department of Corrections have sought to respond to community concern about the number of former prisoners who do not have identification. In an effort to assess the problem, two pilot projects were conducted in Kent County and Kalamazoo County.
- The results of the Kent County pilot, with which I am more familiar, showed that 9% of the parolee population did not have I.D. As of 2004, Michigan had somewhat more than 20,000 parolees, which would mean that **there are approximately 1,800 former prisoners in Michigan who do not have I.D.**
- The 9% figure probably understates the number of parolees who have difficulty obtaining I.D., since the pilot provided only a snapshot of parolees at a particular point in time. **The pilot did not look at how many parolees had problems obtaining I.D. when they were first released.** Every parolee who had difficulty getting I.D., but who had gotten I.D. by the time of the pilot, was counted as having I.D.
- At the same time that the Grand Rapids pilot was taking place, several parolees were coming to Legal Aid of Western Michigan for assistance getting identification. Legal Aid worked with the Secretary of State's office – which was very helpful – to get these individuals their I.D. These individuals were not counted as “exceptions” for the purposes of the pilot program. For whatever reason, parole officers involved in the pilot were not identifying these parolees as needing particular assistance.
- While parole officers handling the pilot made estimates about the amount of time it takes to get I.D., the pilot did not actually track how much time passed from when a prisoner is released until the prisoner obtained I.D.
  - Only 13% of the parolees without I.D. in Kent County were new parolees. The remaining 87% had apparently been without I.D. for some time, though we do not know exactly how long.

- Although the pilots provide useful data, we still do not know how long it takes from when the prisoner walks out the prison gate until the prisoner has I.D.
- **Even assuming that most parolees can eventually get I.D., this does not really solve the problem. The amount of time it takes to get I.D. is critical.**
  - **Research shows that the first days and weeks after release are crucial in terms of preventing former prisoners from returning to crime.** See Urban Institute, *From Prison to Home: The Dimensions and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry* (2001).
- In order to encourage parolees to turn their lives around, we want to make sure that they have I.D. as soon as possible after they leave prison. We want to make it possible for them to work, and to become productive, tax-paying citizens. Ensuring prisoners have I.D. is vital to successful reentry.

### III. What Other States Are Doing

- The lack of I.D. for returning prisoners is a national problem, and has been widely discussed by policy makers working on prisoner reentry.
- States are responding by passing legislation and adopting policies to make sure that every former prisoner has I.D.
- A national survey conducted by the National Hire Network, a clearinghouse for information on the employment of people with criminal records, shows that many states use DOC documents to issue I.D.
  - **Under the proposed legislation, Michigan would join twenty-two other states that accept DOC documentation as proof of identity.**
  - Of the twenty-two states that accept DOC documentation, six accept it as primary proof of identification, and sixteen accept it as secondary proof of identification. In two states (Illinois and Montana) the Secretary of State is simply required to exchange a DOC-issued I.D. for state I.D.